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No Superfund: Feds back off in Silverton

By Dale Rodebaugh

SILVERTON – The effort to stanch the toxic drainage from abandoned hardrock mines here no longer faces a takeover by the federal government.

“We’ve heard loud and clear that you want a collaborative approach,” Martin Hesmark, acting assistant regional director of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 8, based in Denver, said Friday. “We’ll stand back and work collaboratively with you.”

Hesmark delivered the message Friday morning to San Juan County commissioners and Silverton town councilors and in the evening at a community meeting.

The Animas River Stakeholders Group has completed 50 projects since 1994 to reduce the amount of contaminated water from old mines that finds its way into streams and ultimately into the Animas River.

It was the pall of possible federal management of such projects that brought formation of the stakeholders group. Local government officials saw too much Big Brother in the plan and said designation as a federal Superfund site would discourage business and tourism.

“Superfund designation didn’t fit here,” San Juan County Commissioner Pete McKay said. “We believe in the stakeholder group to hold our own and make the system work.”

Four abandoned mines that form a rabbit’s warren of tunnels and bore holes in the San Juan Mountains around Gladstone, a former mining community, are targeted for cleanup.

The American Tunnel to the old Sunnyside mine and the Mogul, Gold King No. 7 and the Red and Bonita mines collectively release 600 to 800 gallons a minute of zinc, iron, cadmium, manganese, copper and lead into tributaries to the Animas River.

The main recipient is Cement Creek. It is so contaminated that it does not harbor aquatic life.

Mineral Creek and the Animas River above Silverton are in fairly decent shape, said Peter Butler of the stakeholder group. But mine drainage into Cement Creek is responsible for deteriorating

water quality and loss of aquatic life in the Animas below here.

Representatives of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Bureau of Reclamation and the Colorado Division of Mining, Safety and Reclamation support the collaborative approach to mine waste remediation.

The mouth of the American Tunnel is on BLM land.

No results are expected immediately. But there appeared to be agreement with the estimate of Steven Fearn that “in three to five years, we’ll be doing very well.”

Fearn is a coordinator of the stakeholder group.

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